

ELECTION OF 1850

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Abraham Lincoln's Political Career Through 1860

Election of 1850

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Excerpt from Letter Written by Thomas L. Harris to Messrs. Lanphier & Walker, Washington, July 19, 1850.

By a letter from _____ of this morning I learn that the Whig convention will be held on the 12th Telegraph me who the gent. is -- Letters from the upper end of the Dist.(?) say that Lincoln is much stronger than Mr. Yates -- My own opinion is, that Lincoln is not as strong a man in the district as Yates -- What is yours? John Mc Connell says Yates & Brown are in a quarrel and he apprehends that it may so far operate as to affect the vote -- Dick can most likely carry Morgan & Scott -- which Lincoln cannot do -- In Sangamon I should prefer they would be about of equal strength.

Excerpt from Letter Written by Thomas L. Harris to Messrs. Lanphier & Walker, Washington, August 23, 1850.

I have just recd the dailies (Regr) of the 14th & 15th- It is evident that Yates is to run on Hardins popularity- It may be not amiss to know that Hardin got his nomination for congress by the vote of Menard & that I did all I could that he might get it over Baker- I will not say that I got the vote of Menard for him- though I might perhaps not mistate if I should say so- It may not be amiss to know further- that Hardin & myself were at Beards-town at court when we heard the news of the battles of the 8 & 9 of May 46- that we agreed mutually each to raise a company- that I raised mine & nothing prevented our being together but Bakers coming here and interfering- and further that Hardin was in constant friendly correspondence with me until we left our respective homes- I still have his letters- These are small matters but you see the drift- Hardins glory is to light Yetes forth to fame-

Charles H. Lanphier Papers in Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.



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LINCOLN'S THEORY OF REPRESENTATION: A SIGNIFICANT NEW LINCOLN DOCUMENT

Editor's Note: I am indebted to Mr. James T. Hickey, Curator of the Lincoln Collection at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield, for calling the text discussed below to my attention and for allowing *Lincoln Lore* to reproduce it. It represents a small part of the greatest new Lincoln collection made available in years, the private papers of Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln. These papers are now deposited at the Illinois State Historical Library. M.E.N., Jr.

"Please do me the favor to inform me whether the enclosed document headed 'Abraham Lincoln's Views', is in your father's handwriting," Richard Yates asked in a letter to Robert Todd Lincoln on December 16, 1909. Yates's father, also named Richard, had been the Governor of Illinois during the Civil War and a political associate of Abraham Lincoln. The elder Yates had preserved the document "for many years in an envelope containing certain letters" from Robert Todd Lincoln's father to him, and, the younger Yates added, "I have kept it since my father's death thirty-six years ago, on the supposition that it was in President Lincoln's handwriting."

Robert Todd Lincoln replied:

I am very much interested in the autograph manuscript of my father which you sent me in your letter of the 16th instant, and which I return to you.

To answer your question as to whether it is in my father's handwriting, specifically, I can answer that it undoubtedly is. While it is not dated, it is apparent that it was written when he was a candidate for election to

his one term in Congress, and it is to me exceedingly interesting as showing that even then he was filled with the thoughts of the identical questions which were the basis of his debate with Senator Douglas. There is no copy of the document among his papers, and I have taken the liberty of having a copy made for my own files; but with no intention of publishing it.

The original document owned by Yates has never been found, and Robert Todd Lincoln's typed copy remains the only version of the document available to Lincoln students. If we may trust Robert's judgment in the matter of his father's handwriting, then the text represents a previously unpublished Lincoln document of considerable significance. And surely Robert was a reliable expert on his father's handwriting. Not only did he receive letters from his father, but Robert was also for many years the "curator" of his father's Presidential papers. For four years he had been lugging seven trunks full of papers back and forth between Washington, D. C., and his summer home. He had on numerous occasions scoured them in searching for particular items that people like Richard Yates asked him about (note that he could say that there was "no copy of the document" among his father's papers).

The typed copy of the document reads thus:

A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position

In relation to the slavery question — Wilmot Proviso — Mr. Clay's compromise, and so on, I think there



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Richard Yates (1815-1873) was Governor of Illinois during the Civil War. He met Abraham Lincoln in the 1830s, when both men were Henry Clay Whigs. He served three terms in the Illinois legislature and two in the United States House of Representatives before becoming Governor of Illinois.

The statement is titled "A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position" rather than "Lincoln's Position." Just two years before, Lincoln had written a similar statement for Zachary Taylor, putting words in that Presidential candidate's mouth in a similar way: "The question of a national bank is at rest; were I President I should not urge it's reiteration upon Congress." It seems likely that this later statement, too, was meant for another's use.

The views were, nevertheless, Lincoln's views. Some of them are of interest. For example, he speaks of slavery's being "pushed wherever nature would allow." This remark suggests the idea that climate could determine the ability of slavery to expand, an idea which Lincoln would quarrel with later in his career.

It is also remarkable to note the degree to which Lincoln adhered to the idea that representatives could be instructed how to vote by their constituents. The idea of instructed representation was not in itself an issue in 1850, but there were numerous references to Yates's having voted to instruct Senators to do what he now would not do himself. Lincoln was a staunch believer in tying the representative closely to the will of his constituents. In 1848, Lincoln called instruction "the primary, the cardinal, the one great living principle of all Democratic representative government — the principle, that the representative is bound to carry out the known will of his constituents." He recognized, however, that instruction was essentially a Democratic dogma. In 1854, he argued that if the Illinois legislature "should instruct Douglas to vote for the repeal of the Nebraska Bill, he must do it, for 'the doctrine of instructions' was a part of his political creed." "A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position" is the only document wherein Lin-

coln reveals his personal willingness to be governed strictly by "the wish of my district" on issues as important as "the slavery question — Wilmot Proviso — Mr. Clay's compromise." He may have qualified his commitment by adding that "There are, however, some things upon which I feel that I am, and shall remain, inflexible." This contradiction followed his statement that he would be governed by the circumstances of the moment, sometime hence, when he would arrive in Congress — not his statement that he would be guided by "the wish of my district" if that wish "shall be known to me." Apparently, he took the ultra-democratic ground that instruction could overrule his personal views even on "the slavery question."

The clarity with which Lincoln announced the primacy of Union in his political beliefs is also of great significance. His willingness to "abandon" the Wilmot Proviso "at once" if it "tended to endanger the Union" is somewhat at odds with later statements in which he viewed the Union as the vehicle of liberty and made it unclear whether union or freedom could be considered of prime importance.

"A Lincoln's view of the Right Position" is a short document, but one worthy of deep study. It deals with fundamental assumptions about democratic government. It might be interpreted as a sign of the survival of Lincoln's political ambition beyond a period when such ambitions were supposed to have disappeared. It is a significant addition to the body of evidence bearing on Lincoln's views on slavery, still the most important subject for study in the Lincoln field. It is safe to predict that it will be, despite its brevity, an oft-quoted and much-interpreted document.



A grand Slave hunt, or Trial of speed for the Presidency, between the celebrated nags Black Dan, Lewis Cass, and Haynes.

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FIGURE 3. The Compromise of 1850 made and destroyed many historical reputations and posed great difficulties for most antislavery Whigs. In this cartoon Daniel Webster is depicted as a slave-catcher, chasing slave women and children with a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law in his hand. The Compromise of 1850 included a tougher Fugitive Slave Law, which antislavery Whigs found hard to swallow. Those who had supported the Wilmot Proviso a mere year or two earlier were likewise embarrassed by having to accept the possibility of slavery in some of the territory acquired from Mexico.

